Free software Computer users find alternatives to high-priced commercial software.

BY KEVIN SAVETZ

When you buy a computer, it most likely comes with Microsoft Windows preinstalled. And when you need a word processor, spreadsheet, or other software, you probably buy it from a computer store. That software is vital. Without it, a computer is just an expensive paperweight.

But you can find free and low-cost alternatives to commercial software. Free software has been available for years but has never been more accessible to everyday computer users. These programs have long been the domain of, well, geeks – experts who were willing to download huge programs from the Internet and who knew how to compile the programs from source code. But free software is entering the mainstream, thanks to faster Internet connections and easier-to-use installers that don't require a degree in computer science.

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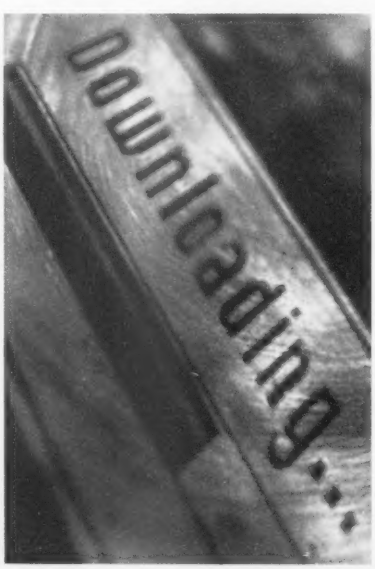
>
> – Richard Stallman

Free software appeals to those on a budget as well as anyone who simply wants another choice. Examples of free software include GNU/Linux, an operating system that replaces Microsoft Windows; OpenOffice, a word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation manager suite; and the GIMP, an image editor that rivals Adobe Photoshop. A PC with GNU/Linux preinstalled can cost hundreds of dollars less than a Microsoft Windows PC.

Free software takes time and money to run, and Microsoft will eagerly tell you that the total cost of ownership for GNU/Linux is umpteen times higher than Windows. But advocates of free software say cost is not the only issue.

"Free software means the users are in control," says Richard Stallman, founder of the not-for-profit Free Software Foundation. "Each non-free program has an owner, a feudal lord in effect, who dominates the program and its users. The owners of non-free software often impose changes on the users, changes meant to suit them, not us."

Free software advocates say there are two kinds of free: free as in "free beer" and free as in "free speech." They're both good but for different reasons. The mantra of the Free Software Foundation is "'Free software' is a matter of liberty, not price." Commercial software licenses – those wordy, legalese-filled documents that no one actually reads before clicking "I Agree" when installing software – usually impose strict limits: You can't install the software on more than one computer; if it doesn't work the way you want, you can't change it; and so on. Free software often has a license too, but it's far less restrictive. Users can amend the software to make it better.



"The main advantage is the community of people who will continue to improve the software on a voluntary basis, especially as it relates to security flaws," says Irwin Taranto, treasurer of the International Computer Users Fellowship of Rotarians.

Most free software can be downloaded from the Internet. The programs are large, so a fast Internet connection helps. Some programs are sold in stores. Many free software licenses allow others to sell the software. Although it may seem ironic, free software users often opt to pay in exchange for value-added features such as printed documentation, a CD installer, and technical support.

The next time you need software for your computer, you might consider free alternatives. It may not be as free as free beer, but it can be as liberating as free speech.

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